

Statement by Dirk Weeldreyer, Superintendent, Fennville Public Schools
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I am very pleased to have an opportunity to speak with you today on this crucial issue.

But first, I would like to begin by personally offering my thanks to the members of this committee for their leadership in enacting a number of significant education reforms over the last few months. These long-awaited reforms will help tremendously in controlling costs and improving teacher quality. They are the same types of tools, in fact, that many charter schools have had for a number of years and we are looking forward to utilizing them. But it is important that these significant changes have an opportunity to work, and that is what brings me here to speak with you today.

In short, the bill being considered is not good policy. It is not that we in traditional public schools are afraid of competition. We are not. Indeed, our system in Michigan has had competition through schools of choice and the existing charter school legislation for many years.

In our county, Allegan County, Fennville was the only community to see a charter school open under the existing legislation. And it's been two and a half years ago now since we saw that school close. It was a school started by well-meaning local citizens who cared about kids, but in the end it was unable to sustain itself.

Now, some may say that our charter school's failure is OK—that the market worked. The school wasn't fit to survive—a fact borne out by its failure. However, I see something else. Today in Fennville, I see a relatively new building, funded at taxpayer expense, sitting empty. Fiber optic cable run to that building at significant cost—and used for only about four months—was a wasted investment.

But much more importantly, I see the students and families—students and families who were forced to find a new educational home when their school failed. Watching that process first-hand, I know what it meant to them.

For Fennville Public Schools, the charter school's closure meant a significant influx of students. We were there to receive them and proud that they chose to come to us. We care about these students and families. But I am worried about what will happen under this legislation.

It would provide for any number of charter schools, operated by for-profit entities. So what is their motive? The profit motive? How much will they care about the students in a particular school when it no longer becomes profitable? Will they pull out leaving the same type of upheaval that so many in our area had to endure? Who will be there when, inevitably, some of these entities fail like in any business startup? Will the traditional school be there to pick up the pieces as we were?

I am also concerned about the diversion of scarce resources. We have a testimony to waste that has stood empty in our community for the last two and a half years. Where else could that money have been used? It seems ironic to me that this is the same Legislature that has avoided funding a second bridge crossing to Canada on the grounds that it would not be a prudent use of

taxpayer money in a time of scarce resources. Here, however, we are considering an even more risky experiment, one that would provide for an unbridled, uncontrolled free-for-all. An experiment that allows public dollars to be siphoned off toward new infrastructure in hopes of some sort of success, absent any real evidence of efficacy. An experiment with new tax breaks for strip malls that host a charter school operation. But most of all, an experiment that is performed on children. And in an era when the state is pushing for consolidation and standardization, why are we creating a system with an unlimited number of small, not-standardized schools?

Yes, this bill will truly bring about the wild, wild West.

This legislature, and particularly this committee, has been about transparency, accountability, and efficacy.

As a school district we welcome the transparency rules because we believe in openness. As stewards of the public trust and taxpayer money, we have a responsibility and obligation to let the public see how their tax dollars are being spent—it is a good thing.

So where do charter schools fall? Why does this legislation not contain such safeguards or requirements? My salary is public information—will the salary and benefits of the CEO of a for-profit educational corporation be available to the public? How will the public know how many of their tax dollars are showing up as profit on a corporate bottom line?

And what safeguards are there to provide for accountability and efficacy of a charter school operation before it opens, before it takes and potentially wastes thousands and thousands of taxpayer dollars?

Our legislators tell us this bill is not about Allegan County schools; rather it is about urban districts with long track records of student failure. And the members of this Committee are well-meaning—that is sure. I also recognize the pressure on members of this Committee from powerful interests who back these sorts of ideas.

But I call on the members of this Committee to act in the best interest of all of the citizens of this state. This legislation is not the right answer.

Do not let an experimental “open-season, wild-wild-west” approach take over Michigan. Yes, there are successful charter schools just like there are successful public schools. But there are also charter schools that are failures. Ensure that our kids are protected from experimental, fly-by-night operations that talk a good line like a modern-day Harold Hill.

At Fennville Public Schools we are improving every day, and with the game-changing reforms already made during this session and during the last few years, we will continue to do so. We stand for transparency, accountability, and efficacy. But those are not qualities represented in this legislation, and until charter schools are held to the same standards as traditional public schools, I ask this committee to stop this bill. Let the game-changing reforms already made during this session and during the last few years work.